

Cover story -- Women priests

Issue Date: January 27, 2006

Some women seeking ordination won't wait for church's OK

After 'illicit but valid' ceremony, they find ways to serve

By KRIS BERGGREN

Bishops may wag their fingers and threaten excommunication, but Catholic women called to ordination feel their time has come. In a gentle protest action at the U.S. bishops' meeting in Washington Nov. 14, members of Women's Ordination Conference delivered a large bouquet of roses to the bishops, with postcards bearing the names of 80 American women interested in ordination and the name of each one's bishop. The roses are a symbol of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, whose feast day it was, who also felt called to priesthood, said participants.

These women say they don't want to abolish the global church; they simply want to reform it. Some will continue to wait for official Vatican approval of women priests, while they support those seeking ordination now through emerging candidate formation programs such as the German-based *Weiheämter für Frauen* and its North American counterpart, Roman Catholic Womenpriests. And they're organizing alternative ordinations, such as the so-called "floating ordinations," which they call "illicit but valid," held in 2002 on the Danube River between Germany and Austria, and last summer on the St. Lawrence Seaway in Canada. Those so ordained now minister in a variety of contexts, some informal and others quite traditional, save for lack of approval by church authorities.

Celine Goessl, 70, a Sister of Mercy of the Holy Cross from Birch Run, Mich., said she's felt called to ordination since she was in high school but won't pursue it "until Rome says I can," because she doesn't want to put her superiors in a position that would pit them against church hierarchy. In 1971 she wrote to her bishop asking for ordination to the diaconate.

"I got a scathing letter telling me not to ask 'stupid' questions that I knew he could not fulfill," she said. In 1975 Goessl attended the inaugural meeting in Detroit of the Women's Ordination Conference, the locus for the women's ordination movement in the United States; she currently serves on its board.

"At that time we were an enthusiastic bunch and we thought women's ordination was just around the corner. It's probably good that it wasn't because we have grown over the

years and matured. We see a renewed concept of what a priestly servanthood really means, and what the need is,” said Goessl. The rallying cry in the women’s ordination movement is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s concept of a “discipleship of equals,” an idea that would effectively abolish the clerical caste in the current Roman Catholic hierarchy.

“Basically, [that phrase] is exactly how I see myself as a woman priest,” said the Rev. Victoria Rue of Watsonville, Calif., ordained last summer on the St. Lawrence Seaway. “I don’t see myself being other or better or in a higher state than anyone else.”

Women’s ordination advocates are particularly incensed at what they see as blatant injustice in the comparison between the dismissal of women seeking ordination and the protection of priests who have committed sexual abuse or bishops who cover their tracks.

Regina Nicolosi of Red Wing, Minn., ordained a deacon with Rue last summer, and her husband, Charles Nicolosi, a deacon in the St. Paul and Minneapolis archdiocese, met with Archbishop Harry Flynn Oct. 24 at her request, after she received two letters from the St. Paul chancery asking her to recant and threatening excommunication if she failed to do so.

“I felt it would be good to talk more and maybe to expose the archbishop to some of our ideas about why we are doing this and how much we feel part of the Roman Catholic church and have no intention to leave or bring about a split,” Nicolosi said. “Also the frustration we feel that some of these actions of ours that are done with very good intentions are punished very severely but other actions [such as sexual abuse and its cover-up] are hidden or the church tries to work around it.”

While there is no lack of pastoral opportunity nationwide -- as priestless parishes cope with lack of sacraments, and headlines week after week decry new waves of clerical sexual abuse and administrative cover-up -- women’s names aren’t popping up on lists to fill empty pastor positions.

“Where do we go to be women priests?” asked Rue, who teaches theater and comparative religions and women’s studies at San Jose State University in California. After all, she noted, no one is offering her a parish or a Newman Center to lead. “We go to our businesses, our theaters, our universities. We go to where the people are, and we identify ourselves as women priests. Not to further the divide between cleric and lay, but to bring people together.”

Rue, 58, plans to continue to minister to her house church, and reach out to the local gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community as well as to university students.

Who to serve was, indeed, part of Carmen Lane’s discernment process about her call to ordination. “What community is calling me to serve it?” said Lane, 30, who works with survivors of sexual violence at Michigan State University and has just entered the Roman Catholic Womenpriests formation program. As a black lesbian, Lane says she hasn’t

always felt welcome in the church. But Lane, who converted to Catholicism at 17, said, “I also think that from the beginning of my call to participate in the church through my baptism, I was called to minister to folks who are exhibiting oppressive behaviors. To be Christian is not to be at the center of society, it is to challenge injustice in whatever form that injustice is manifest, whether it’s racism, sexism, institutional inequality. And I see women’s ordination as yet another inequality that keeps the church from fully realizing itself.”

Dagmar Braun Celeste, the first lady of Ohio from 1983-1991, was ordained -- and subsequently excommunicated -- in 2002 in Europe. She was ordained under the pseudonym Angela White because she wanted to protect her family’s privacy during the time leading up to her daughter’s wedding. She decided to tell Cleveland Bishop Anthony Pilla about her ordination before the newspapers found out. He asked what she planned to do.

“I said, ‘Well, I suppose you’re not going to assign me to a parish,’ ” she said. Celeste’s primary ministry is promoting peacemaking, healing and creativity through Tyrian, a Cleveland nonprofit organization she cofounded in 2000, though she does sacramental work on request. Celeste received word through Pilla’s office of her excommunication by the Vatican, though under her pseudonym. A member of St. Patrick Parish in Cleveland, Celeste attends Mass there and elsewhere but does not regularly receive Communion unless, as is often the case, a lay person chooses to share the host with her.

Nicolosi considers the nursing home where she is a chaplain and conducts Communion services her “small parish.” She is in formation for the priesthood through Roman Catholic Womenpriests, with plans to be ordained next summer at Lake Constance, Switzerland.

“After my priestly ordination, I will consecrate, too,” she said. “I did talk with all my Catholic residents before the ordination. They know me. There were some surprises, but most accept what I am doing.”

Nicolosi is clear that she sees herself as a Roman Catholic but wants the church to carry out “what Vatican II has started: an opening to the world, greater inclusivity, more emphasis on the local parish and national churches; priesthood that would include men and women, married or not, also gays and lesbians.”

Denise Donato was ordained in 2003 in Rochester, N.Y., by a bishop of the Ecumenical Catholic diocese; she serves at Spiritus Christi, formed by parishioners who left the Roman Catholic Corpus Christi Parish (see related story on Page 5). The morning after last summer’s ordination of nine women on the St. Lawrence Seaway, Donato greeted the newly ordained at breakfast. “I congratulated them and said, ‘Now, go out and live it. Out there are people who are hungry for what the church has to offer. Gather groups and break bread and go into hospitals and anoint the sick and really minister to the people. There are people who are starving for church.’ ”

“Ordination,” Donato said later, “is not the sacrament to live in our apartments, it is to be lived among the people. That is the hope, that they are creating the church they have longed for. Because they are not the only ones longing for it.”

Kris Berggren lives and writes in Minneapolis.

Living the dream of an egalitarian priesthood

The dream of egalitarian priesthood is being lived within a Catholic, if not Roman, context at a parish in Rochester, N.Y., where the Revs. Mary Ramerman and Denise Donato along with Jim Callan, a former diocesan priest, serve a “full service” Catholic community. Spiritus Christi was formed by parishioners who left Corpus Christi Parish in 1998 after a highly publicized, protracted tug of war with the hierarchy over women’s liturgical roles and ministry to gay and lesbian parishioners. Today Spiritus Christi holds three weekend Masses plus daily Mass, enrolls 250 children in faith formation classes, sponsors a variety of community ministries, and hosts two dozen weddings a year, both gay and straight. Each a married mother of three, Ramerman and Donato bring their family experience to their pastoral work.

Women’s experience of being called to priesthood is often layered with spiritual and emotional tension. Donato, for example, struggled for a decade with her call, which came clearly, she said, during an Ignatian retreat in 1987.

“For many years I kept thinking there was something wrong with me,” Donato said. “I thought I had some inflated sense of self. I wondered why God would call me. I felt like if the church said women aren’t called to be priests then I must be mistaken. I really needed to grapple with that before I could have courage to take my own next steps.” Those included pursuing a master’s of divinity degree. Finally in 1997, Donato, then on staff at Corpus Christi, wrote to Bishop Matthew Clark to ask him for ordination. Though he was “warm and inviting, he said, no, he could not do that,” she said.

Ramerman could be the poster priest for women’s ordination; approachable and confident, she says she loves celebrating Mass, preparing homilies, counseling parishioners and making hospital visits.

After Callan was removed from Corpus Christi as pastor, explained Ramerman, “even though I wasn’t the assigned leader from the diocese, people saw me as the leader. I think I realized probably for the first time [that] the possibility of ministry in the church is a privilege doled out by men to women. If you are working for a benevolent pastor who is comfortable with women, you can do a lot of things: preach, visit the hospital, et cetera, but if that pastor changes, all of a sudden you can be told your only job is to carry the little water vessel up to the sanctuary.”

She was eventually ordained before thousands of parishioners and invited guests in 2001 at the Eastman Theatre in Rochester by Bishop Peter Hickman of the Ecumenical Catholic diocese; Donato was ordained in 2003.

“The sad part for me,” said Ramerman, “is that as women we love the spirituality of the church but we love it so much that we allow the abuse of women to go on. ... I might have a good place here but this is not what is going on around the church.”

-- Kris Berggren

National Catholic Reporter, January 27, 2006

Copyright © The National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company, 115 E. Armour Blvd., Kansas City, MO 64111

All rights reserved.
TEL: 816-531-0538 FAX: 1-816-968-2280